HOPES AND FEARS
December 11, 2005

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Psalm 126
Luke 1:26–38

"The angel said to her,
'Do not be afraid, Mary.'"
Luke 2:30 (NRSV)

All proclamations about God must be surrounded by silence—
a silence that kneels before the ineffable mystery.
When it comes to God we're all blind and deaf
and therefore ought to be, at least now and then, mute.
Who has a mind large enough and a spirit capacious enough to embrace deity?
Knowledge of the divine must be knowledge we have received;
it comes not from clever intellectualizing, imaginative speculation,
or spiritual daydreaming, but from quiet attentive listening.

Christian faith affirms that the One who is wholly other,
who is obscured by the thick darkness of our own ignorance,
has shined a light of self-revelation.
This divine Word, being personal has a name:
Jesus Christ.

Donald McCullough
If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It?

In these busy days of preparation
give us a few minutes of quiet and peace this morning, O God.
In the midst of all the expectation and pressure we place on others and ourselves,
come with the gift of your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mary made it onto the cover of *Time* magazine last March. The headline read "Hail, Mary; Catholics have long revered her, but now Protestants are finding their own reasons to celebrate the mother of Jesus." The cover article, a full-length essay, a good one, was about how Protestants are rediscovering Mary and, after centuries of ignoring her, are now paying attention and finding a place for her in scholarship, worship, piety, and

sermons. One of mine I preached last Advent about recovering Mary, in fact, was quoted. It earned me some mail from Catholic friends around the country, including one that said, “You know, Buchanan, sooner or later we’re going to get you back.”

Harvard’s Peter Gomes says we Protestants aren’t sure what to do with her because we think she must be a Catholic. Gomes tells the story about the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Anglican, in London, who dies and goes to heaven. As he enters the pearly gates, Jesus comes down from the right hand of God to greet him and says, “Welcome to heaven, Dean. I know you’ve met my father, but I don’t believe you know my mother.”

Princeton New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa points out that while Mary’s appearances in the Gospel story are brief and frustratingly devoid of anecdote, “there isn’t a figure comparable to her. No major player appears earlier in the story and none is present in all these key situations: at Jesus’ birth, his death, the upper room.” It occurs to me that she is the one person who was with Jesus every single day of his life. She nursed, fed, bathed, nurtured him in infancy; corrected, taught, loved him in childhood; and mothered him daily in adolescence. She talked with him, through young adulthood, and he was, in all probability, the source of her income through the carpenter shop in Nazareth.

In the Catholic tradition, the feast of the Annunciation, when the angel appeared to young Mary, is observed on March 25, exactly nine months before Christmas—thus the *Time* cover article last March. That story, in the first chapter of Luke, is our text this morning.

It is a scene of great mystery, beauty, simplicity, but also fear. It has inspired some of the most gorgeous art in history, including my favorite, by Fra Angelica, a fifteenth-century fresco, in the Monastery of San Marcos in Florence, where the artist was one of the brothers. Fra Angelica—“the Brother who paints like an angel”—captured the moment when the angel Gabriel appears to a young Jewish girl, maybe in her early teens. “Hail, Mary. Greetings, favored one!” the angel says. “The Lord is with you.” The painting is in the gorgeous, soft pastels Fra Angelica made famous. The angel and Mary lean toward each other, looking intently. It is a picture of serenity, peace, mystery—and fear, perhaps. The next thing the angel says is “Do not be afraid, Mary,” which means, of course, that that is exactly what Mary was, not merely much perplexed, but afraid.

Of course Mary was afraid. She had plenty to be afraid of apart from this unexpected and awkward new situation. Her life would be hard. She was a poor adolescent girl in a poor village on the outer borders of the Roman Empire. Her brightest, best hope was to be given by her family in marriage to someone substantial who could provide for her. Her hopes were to have

children who lived, to have a roof over her head and enough food to subsist, to live long enough to see grandchildren, and to die in peace. Her fears were realistic: poverty, hunger, sickness, widowhood, violence, and death.

In a commentary on today's passage, Steve Montgomery wonders whether Mary made the angel wait for an answer after he delivered his message and thinks she did. After all, she was an adolescent girl and was always pondering things in her heart. In any event, this conversation is not complete until she responds. This is not God acting alone, unilaterally performing miracles. This is God waiting for the response of a girl, who is understandably frightened. And when the answer comes, it is simple and profound: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Fear. Courage. Hope

The best line in the music of the season, I believe, is in the first verse of the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

The dreadful event at the Miami airport last Wednesday was a blunt reminder, in the middle of Advent, of the reality of the fear in which we have become accustomed to live. As I wait, impatiently, for the security routine, the electronic surveillance, the inevitable pat down—"hold your arms out, palms up, I'll have to pat you where the alarm goes off, open your belt, arms down, have a nice day"—I find myself remembering that it wasn't all that long ago that there were no security restrictions, that you could walk out to the gate and meet your grandchildren with no more obstacles than walking into a department store.

Someone said recently that we used to live in the age of anxiety, but since 9/11, it has become the age of paranoia.

In a review of Ian McEwan's wonderful novel *Saturday*, Charles Mendenhall observes how our life is tinted by threat advisory levels; with each terrorist attack in the world, a spectrum of colors regulates our collective anxiety. For the most part we live "yellow" lives (elevated or significant risk of terrorist attack), or occasionally "orange" (high risk of terrorist attack). Gone are the days of "blue" and "green" (guarded or low risk). A CNN poll after the bombing in London subways last summer showed that a majority of us expect an imminent terrorist attack.

We are living in an era and a situation of unprecedented anxiety. That's what McEwan's novel *Saturday* is about, the story of one day in the life of a British neurosurgeon, a day that moves from pleasant expectations of recreation time with a friend, careful preparation of dinner and a reunion

with family, to threat and violence. The doctor, like all of us, longs for a "coherent world, rational, secure, harmonious and orderly." But chaos, danger, and death loom and threaten. And the doctor has to draw deeply from his spirit to act with resolve and courage, which he does. It is an Advent story. (See *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2005.)

There's plenty to be afraid about—not only Kyle Orton's passing percentage and Kerry Wood's pitching arm, but serious, deadly serious, matters: terrorist attack, bird flu, global warming, secondhand smoke, suicide bombings in Israel and Iraq.

There is apparently something in us that is essentially, or potentially, fearful. Fear is hardwired into us: fear of falling, fear of abandonment, there in us from birth apparently. Later, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of uncertainty, fear of aging, fear of debilitation, fear of death. Garrison Keillor remembers as a child scaring himself to death in bed at night, imagining that the shadows on his bedroom wall were monsters and the creaking of the stairway was caused by "the murderers" who he imagined were always out there looking for him. He remembers that he was so frightened lying there in bed that he crossed himself even though he was a Protestant (*Leaving Home*).

Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear, Jean Bethke Elshtain says, causes us to make bad decisions. Fear sells car alarms, security systems, and fire insurance policies. Fear prompts people to make dangerous decisions, like buying and carrying a handgun, thereby significantly increasing the probability that they will kill a friend or family member. Fear prompts nations to declare war and to question and compromise fundamental and precious values. We are having a national conversation about civil liberties, about the limits of due process, about rendition—the practice of transporting prisoners to other countries that do not have the civil liberties and the guarantees that we do, holding people in prison indefinitely, and, of all things, torture. Fear is a powerful motivator.

Of course Mary was afraid—afraid of what would happen to her, afraid of what her fiancé would say when she told him she was pregnant, afraid of what her family and community would say and do, afraid of the religious community, which was known to stone women who committed adultery, and, beyond all of that, afraid of pregnancy and childbirth, as any teenager would be, afraid of what would become of her, and, just beginning in her mind, her emotions, afraid for her baby and what it might mean for him to be the Son of the Most High.

And so when her answer comes, it is one of the great moments in the Bible, in all of history, actually: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Kathleen Norris says about that moment, “Mary doesn’t lose her voice [in fear], but finds it. Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead.”

Mary is modeling what it means to be faithful, what faith looks like: acting in the face of uncertainty, following without knowing where you will be lead, trusting God even though you’re trembling with fear.

When God comes, when God calls, Norris asks, “do I retreat . . . [in fear] or can I respond and say something new, a ‘yes’ that will change me forever?” (*Christian Century* 25 December 2005).

What is going on in this story is Mary, a young girl, modeling one of the most radical of all the ideas in the Bible, namely that God chooses human beings to bring about the kingdom, that God comes to and chooses unlikely, surprisingly unexpected, unprepared, and unequipped human beings to do the work of the kingdom and then waits for a response, for a yes, for “Here am I.”

God comes to each of us, perhaps not in the clear simplicity of Mary’s story, perhaps not in the beautiful pastels of a Renaissance painting, but God does come, we believe, to call us to faithfulness, to love, to compassion, to generosity. God does come to each of us and asks us to be brave, to release our tight grip on certainty, security, safety, and to risk trusting God and following.

Walter Brueggemann says the angel’s message to Mary, “Fear not,” is the essence of Christian faith.

It is there from the beginning, in the words of the prophets to captive Israel, in lonely exile: “Fear not.”

It is there for old Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, who cannot believe his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, is pregnant: “Fear not.”

It is there when the angel visits Joseph to tell him his young fiancée will have a child: “Fear not, Joseph.”

It is there on the hillside when the heavens open and a group of shepherds are startled by glorious light and an angel chorus: “Fear not. I bring you tidings of great joy.”

And it is there years later when heartbroken, frightened disciples go to the tomb on the first day of the week in the early light of dawn: “Fear not. He is not here.”

Faithful courage is not the absence of fear. It is the willingness to act, to follow, to be, in the face of fear.

Sometime in these days of Advent, perhaps when you are least expecting it, in a way you would never have imagined, God will come and ask you to be something you've not been before, to trust, to love, to give, to open yourself to another, to be vulnerable. Sometime in these days of Advent, when you are least expecting it, God will come and say, "Do not be afraid. Trust me. Follow me. There is nothing to fear."

Perhaps it is a new venture you're afraid you're not up to, or you're facing surgery and the outcome is uncertain and you're afraid, or you're dealing with unemployment and the challenge of finding a new job and you're scared, or random accidents, or that final fear deep in the human heart, what Paul Tillich called fear of nonbeing, darkness, death.

I love something Anne Lamott said about courage. Courage, Lamott says, is merely fear that has said its prayers.

Some of us were privileged to witness that last week. One of our dear and faithful members, Sue Duffy, died. Sue battled MS for twenty-five years. She moved downtown seventeen years ago to be close to Northwestern Hospital and became part of this congregation. She was here every week, in recent years in her wheelchair as her illness progressed and she became more and more limited. She never gave up or gave in. She drove her motorized wheelchair from Warren Barr Pavilion in all sorts of weather. She chaired committees, served on boards, made telephone calls—with one hand, finally, when she could no longer use the other. She was unfailingly upbeat and strong and along the way became a consistent and persistent and faithful advocate for people with physical and accessibility challenges. She declined rapidly recently and knew that the end was near. Her family gathered, her friends, her pastors. Near the end, she asked one of our pastoral residents to write down her suggestions for her memorial service, which he did. And then she said she wanted him to write down "My message to my friends and family"—and I'm going to assume Sue wouldn't mind including her church.

> I am free! My physical struggle is over! My soul is free to fly. Rejoice and celebrate my life and your love for me and for one another. Love is the name of the game. . . . Be good to one another. Always remember and celebrate the times we spent together.

Hopes and fears. . . . Fear not.

Christian hope lives in the face of the uncertainty, pain, loss, even death that each of us sooner or later confronts.

Christian hope is fear that has said its prayers.

Christian fear and hope are in the voice of a young girl, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy word.”

Because that child was born in Bethlehem, because God’s love came to be among us, the angel’s message is for you and for me. “Fear not.”

> O little town of Bethlehem
> How still we see thee lie!
> Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
> The silent stars go by.
> Yet in thy dark streets shineth
> The everlasting light;
> The hopes and fears of all the years
> Are met in thee tonight.

Dear God, you know our hearts. You know our fears and our hopes. In these lovely days of waiting may we hear, once again, those blessed words, “Fear not.” We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen